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Aide-memoire from the Government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics to the Government of the United States of America, dated 10 February 1968

On 21 January 1968 a B-52 bomber of the United States Strategic Air Command carrying four hydrogen bombs crashed in the area of North Star Bay off the western coast of Greenland while trying to land at the United States Air Force base at Thule.

As a result of the disaster the bombs fragmented and radio-active substances leaked out of them. The search party of the United States Air-Force that arrived at the place of the accident has stated that radio-activity consisting of alpha particles emitted by plutonium has been discovered in the vicinity of Thule. According to a dispatch of Associated Press, the leader of the search party, Major General Richard O. Hunziker, has stated that, apparently, it will take months before the United States Air Force succeeds in recovering the lost bombs, and that the search party has not even determined the scale of the problem facing it.

Competent scientists in various countries consider that the risk of radio-active contamination off the shores of Greenland is a very serious one. The extensive fisheries areas of the Atlantic Ocean will suffer from radio-active contamination for many months and possibly years. This hazard will be even further increased when radio-active particles are caught up by currents and carried throughout the waters of the Atlantic. The Gulf Stream, which washes the shores of many States, is directly in the area of radio-activity.

The operations of the United States Air Force, which have led, not for the first time, to radio-active contamination of wide areas of the sea, are a violation of the generally recognized principles and standards of international law. They are contrary to the purpose of the Moscow Treaty of 1963 banning nuclear weapon tests in the atmosphere, in outer space and under water. This purpose is to "put an end to the contamination of man's environment by radioactive substances". These operations also infringe the 1958 Convention on the High Seas, to which the United States is a party. This Convention obliges each State to take measures to prevent "pollution of the seas or air space above, resulting from any activities with radio-active materials or other harmful agents".

In attempting to minimize the seriousness of the disaster, the United States Defense Department has stated that the hydrogen bombs did not explode because they had a safety device. Of course, this explanation in no way alters the fact of the dangerous leakage of radio-active substances from the hydrogen bombs, which occurred in the present case, as in many previous similar cases. Attempts to represent as normal a situation in which United States nuclear bombs fall to the ground year after year, even though they have a safety device, cannot be taken seriously.

Is there any guarantee that the next accident to a United States bomber armed with nuclear bombs will not lead to the explosion of the bombs, with all the ensuing consequences? According to a statement in the Western press, there has already been an incident in which, at the time of an accident to a United States B-52 bomber in January 1961, four of the five switches were brought into operation, and everything depended solely on the last switch, which, had it been actuated, would have caused the hydrogen bomb to explode.

According to an Associated Press dispatch from Thule, each of the four hydrogen bombs carried by the B-52 bomber was of 1.1 megatons. The explosion of even one of these bombs would be 50 times greater than the power of the explosion that wiped Hiroshima off the face of the earth. Such a catastrophe is possible not only over Greenland, but also over densely populated areas of the earth, since the United States Air Force, as is known, makes flights over many countries of the world. Who can guarantee that in the present, tense enough situation, such a nuclear explosion would not entail a whole chain of irreversible events, hazardous for the whole of mankind?

It is therefore quite understandable that many Governments, including Governments of the military allies of the United States, are protesting against flights of American aircraft carrying nuclear weapons in their air space. Two years ago, when United States nuclear bombs fell on Spanish soil in the Palomares area, a number of Governments protested against such flights and demanded their cessation. Justifiable anxiety is now being expressed by the Government of Denmark, which has stated that flights over Greenland of aircraft carrying nuclear weapons are a violation of existing agreements.

The Soviet Government, for its part, has more than once warned the Government of the United States of the serious risk that is represented by flights of bombers carrying nuclear weapons outside national boundaries. Attention was drawn to this in the aide-memoire from the Soviet Government to the Government of the United States of 16 February 1966 in connexion with the incident on the Spanish coast, when a

considerable area of land and water was contaminated by radio-activity following a similar air disaster. Nevertheless, as is evidenced, in particular, by the new disaster to a United States B-52 bomber off the shores of Greenland, the United States Government has not drawn the appropriate conclusions.

The Soviet Government once again draws the attention of the United States Government to the dangerous and even aggressive nature of flights by United States bombers carrying nuclear weapons, especially in the neighbourhood of the boundaries of the Soviet Union. From a purely military standpoint these flights by United States bombers are pointless under the circumstances of the existence of nuclear missile weapons. They can have only one purpose: to increase international tension, without regard to the consequences for the security of the peoples and the fate of mankind. It is obvious that the responsibility for such a way of acting rests wholly and entirely on the Government of the United States.